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AUTHOR Waln, Virginia
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ABSTRACT

The rhetorical technique of Simone de Beauvoir's "The Second Sex" is discussed and analyzed as one source of its impact on the women's movement. De Beauvoir's existentialist philosophy is seen as the most significant factor both in her perception of the world and in the rhetorical style adopted in the book. This includes both a phenomenological approach emphasizing empirical description and a dialogical style which will continue to communicate its message for years to come. (AA)

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THE SECOND SEX AS A CLASSIC: A RHETORICAL CRITICISM

Virginia Waln
Department of Speech Communication
San Diego State University
San Diego, California 92182

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THE SECOND SEX AS A CLASSIC: A RHETORICAL CRITICISM

One of the most significant documents in the rhetoric of the present feminist movement is The Second Sex by Simone de Beauvoir, one of the most influential figures in French literature as well as a prominent existentialist.[1] Le Deauxiéme, first published in France in 1949, was translated into an English version, The Second Sex, in 1953. Initial reactions of the American public to the book were varied. Some asserted that the contents of the book were distorted and presented slanted views.[2] Others thought that her arguments would be distressing to men.[3] Still others believed that her information was not applicable to Americans because she was speaking from a European viewpoint about European women.[4] Certain critics also cautioned readers about her socialistic political values and her existentialist orientation.[5]

The overall response by critics, however, was very positive. The book was described as a "superb book. . . . brilliantly written with broad scope and keen psychological insights . . ."[6] as well as "erudite, . . . penetrating, . . . challenging, . . . contain[ing] a wealth of material."[7] Her literary style was much praised.[8] Some hoped that the book would dispell contemporary prejudices about women.[9] Ashley Montagu stated that it was a great book: "[I]t will be read

a long time after most works on the subject have been forgotten."[10] And, indeed, his prediction has materialized. Today, The Second Sex is considered a classic[11] that has "changed minds and probably history. . . ."[12] Mlle de Beauvoir's nonsexist ideologies are the basis for the current feminist movement,[13] and as such, the book is in part responsible for the social change that is now occurring.[14]

In addition to its historical significance, however, The Second Sex is also significant rhetorically, for it is because of its rhetorical power that the book has had profound influence on the Women's Movement world-wide and in the United States in particular. The central argument of this paper is that the rhetorical power of The Second Sex lies in Beauvoir's model of existentialist dialogical communication--the first such philosophical statement about men and women--that has functioned as a primary resource, in content, for the rhetoric of the feminist movement and has, thus, been instrumental in raising the consciousness level of the American people. This paper will, therefore, discuss existentialism in relation to the American audience and the power of Beauvoir's dialogical rhetoric which has made The Second Sex a classic.

Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist philosophy is the most significant factor of her perception of the world and her creation of The Second Sex. Existentialism is concerned with maintaining the "rights and existence and reality of

the human individual--its freedom and own possibility."[15] Throughout history, emphasis has been placed on material objects, and the individual has been de-emphasized; from this lack of concern for the individual grew existentialism, which accents the importance of the human individual and maintains that human freedom involves something in people that cannot be explained merely in historical or scientific ways.[16]

In existentialism, one must assume one's freedom by reaffirming one's autonomy and choosing one's own life. One must "transcend," or move beyond, or react against pre-existing roles placed on one by society which relieves one of the necessity of making choices. A child passively lives in a world of "immanence," (the opposite of transcendance), and accepts the pre-existing roles of society; however, unless the maturing child realizes that such a life is meaningless and learns to make his/her own choices, his/her future will also be meaningless.[17] In essence, this realization describes an awareness Mlle de Beauvoir experienced as a young girl alone in her grandmother's house; she had noticed an old, worn jacket hanging on the back of a chair, and realized that the jacket was unable to make decisions or choices or even assert its own existence. In this she saw her own lack of autonomy and ultimate destruction.[18]

The position of women in Beauvoir's bourgeois society was that of the immanent child who accepted prescribed roles set forth by society and reinforced by socialization. Women belonged to an inferior caste and were traditionally expected

to fulfill the various roles of wife, mother, society matron, and courtesan. Women also were oppressed economically because of poor working conditions, lack of education, and lack of birth control and abortion.[19] Her use of the word "caste" as opposed to "class" is significant, for in classes, one may move from one to another; however, one is born into a caste and may not leave it.[20]

Although The Second Sex was not written specifically for the American people, the book is pertinent to an American audience. When The Second Sex was translated into English in 1953, both women and men in the United States generally accepted traditional societal roles and demanded that others accept them as well. It was believed that there are fundamental differences between males and females beyond the obvious sex differences, and, therefore, they should have different statuses and serve different functions. American society is based on the patriarchal family, whereby power, wealth, property and title pass through the male line directly; from this concept of patriarchy came the basic notions of women's inferiority.[22] In addition, the Puritan influence throughout the infancy of the United States further promoted male dominance; only men could be citizens. Women had no legal status or property rights except in relation to their husbands.[23] From the Christian viewpoint, women were thought to be "morally weak, irrational, and untrustworthy."[24] While the position of women in the United States in 1953 was not identical to the position

of French women, criticism that The Second Sex is not applicable to American women is unfounded.

Beauvoir's main argument is that man has created artificial distinctions between masculine and feminine functions, and, thus, has kept women in a false, passive role. From existentialist principles, Beauvoir stated two postulates in The Second Sex: (1) man has conceived himself as the essential being and woman as "the Other"--viewed in opposition to man and toward whom hostility is directed;[25] and (2) there is no feminine nature because there is no human nature:

> [T]he word nature [is] understood here as essence. . . . [Since] existence precedes essence . . . man [in the general sense] need not conform to any archetype. . . . [O]nly in the very process of living does he create his own values, his own being, his essence. If there is no archetypal human nature, there obviously can be no feminine or masculine nature.[26]

For woman to be considered "Other" is to deny her existence as a human being. Beauvoir also stated that one is not born a woman; but rather, one becomes a woman.[27]

Mlle de Beauvoir holds that biology is the only true division of the sexes, and that biological differences do not justify the historical, social, and cultural subjugation of women.[28] Women's behavior and status is merely the result of history, society, and culture--and these factors either promote or hinder a woman's search of individuality and freedom to surmount by transcending or reacting against it.[30]

It is important to note that Mlle de Beauvoir has never opposed maternity and homemaking; however, from the exis-

tentialist position, there is a distinction between a woman who "assumes" these roles because she chooses them and a woman who "accepts" the roles simply because society has imposed them on her. If the role is "assumed," then the situation is transcended. Furthermore, "humanity is not an animal species and . . . a woman becomes human to the extent that she reacts against her nature . . . [or] those biological factors that help determine her situation."[31]

Within this existentialist worldview, lies a theory of communication which is of great importance to an understanding of Beauvoir's writing. The first aspect of the existentialist approach to human communication is an emphasis on empirical description.[32] Whereas

> [m]odern thought has ignored the complex phenomenon of communication [,] [t]he existentialists have rightly called our attention to them as an essential phase of human existence, and have begun the arduous task of describing them as they actually occur[.] . . . The existentialist thinkers have laid the first foundations for a sound phenomenonology of communication."[33]

This phenomenological approach seeks to "isolate and scrutinize concrete facts and acts of existence just as they are."[34] Thus, empirical description is fundamental in The Second Sex, as in all of Beauvoir's books, as a means of revealing the "truth."[35] In existentialism, the creative individual can not be neutral but must choose to involve one's self in human affairs. Mlle de Beauvoir chose to change the social order of her world, and to do so, she sought to report the empirical truth about men and women.[36]

In The Second Sex, Beauvoir was compelled to describe the biological differences between men and women as well as the images of women that have been perpetuated throughout history in myths, psychology, anthropology, sociology, and religion. From her viewpoint, women who were not assuming their freedom by rejecting prescribed roles were not living authentically human lives. It was necessary to describe all aspects of socialization to provide a new awareness for both men and women. Her massive research resulted in two volumes totaling over one thousand pages.[37]

The second aspect of the existentialist theory of communication is the mode of communication. For the existentialist, "genuine communication is a task to be achieved rather than an omnipresent feature of conventional behavior."[38] This task may be expressed in terms of dialogical communication, with monologue being the opposite of dialogue. In monologue, the communicator displays more concern for his/her own interests than for those of the audience. Monologue is characterized by self-centeredness, deception, domination, and manipulation.[39] In dialogue, however, positive emotions and an even greater depth of involvement are asserted.[40] Dialogue is characterized by genuineness, accuracy, empathy, understanding, and an unconditional positive regard.[41] "Dialogue goes directly and honestly to the differences between 'me and thee,' and this requires an immense toughnness of self--for it does combat without going on the defensive."[42] It is

able to reject an idea or behavior of another while stil confirming him/her as a person.[43] Dialogue seeks a union of truth and understanding.[44]

In viewing The Second Sex as a piece of dialogical communication, it is necessary to first understand Beauvoir's motive for writing the book; for her lack of self-concern and self-centeredness are prerequisite to dialogue. The book was not the result of a personal problem that Simone de Beauvoir experienced; she did not feel inferior.[45] Because of her rejection of traditional roles very early in life and her personal ambitions, she was not forced to fulfill the roles of mother and housewife. Her attainment of the most honored French postgraduate degree in philosophy gave her immediate recognition from men because her achievement was so exceptional. Mlle de Beauvoir has always gotten along well with men during her life;[46] she dismisses a total repudiation of men and condemns "American feminists who conceive of men as the enemy."[47] It is interesting to note, for example, that The Second Sex was dedicated to a male friend, Jacques Bost, rather than to a woman. As Cottrell observed, Mlle de Beauvoir "seems to have been more comfortable in the society of men than of women."[48] Thus, her attack on men was made not with malice, but with empathy and positive regard; and she was, therefore, able to reject men's supression of women without rejecting men.

In Beauvoir's own mind, as well, The Second Sex was written quite objectively.[49] The motivation for the book

actually came from her initial idea to write a book about herself; Jean-Paul Sartre, her life-long colleague and companion, however, recommended that she first examine the way in which being a woman influenced her existence. She was amazed to realize that she was living in a masculine world, that she had been raised with myths regarding women and their roles, and that her behavior and experience had been totally different from those of a male.[50] This realization of women's status provided the motivation for The Second Sex. The book was not written in anger to function as impetus to the feminist movement which would elevate women above men, but was created merely out of concern for the whole feminine condition[51] and was a matter of "being human beings."[52] Clearly, Beauvoir's interest, as required of dialogue, was for her audience rather than for herself.

The Second Sex directed itself to the differences that existed between the reality of society and Beauvoir's philosophy of how society should be, an essential characteristic of dialogue; her rhetorical strategy was subversion and affirmation.[53] Mlle de Beauvoir's subversive rhetorical efforts were focused on the false images and unrealistic roles of women; however, the underlying subversive attack was made upon the socialization process which initiates roles stereotyping. The socialization of the sexes or the imposition of these traditional roles is a result of a phenomenon that is referred to as a "nonconscious ideology:"

> a set of beliefs and attitudes which persons accept implicitly but which remain outside their awareness because alternative conceptions of the world remain unimagined. . . . This form of ideology is the most subtle and profound form of social influence . . . which remains invisible.[54]

Beauvoir sought to subvert these traditional societal sex-roles which are molded by culture during infancy and childhood and reinforced throughout one's life and which have implied that males should be aggressive, assertive, domineering, competitive and independent. Further, the societal roles suggest that females should be passive, submissve, dependent, tender and sensitive.[55] Consequently, within this framework, women develop higher affiliation needs, more dependence, aspire to a smaller range of vocations, and often display a motivation to avoid success because competence, independence, competition, and intellectual achievement are viewed as qualities inconsistent with femininity--even though they view these traits as positive to masculinity and mental health.[56] Clearly, not only the attitudes of men about women but of women about women, as well, have threatened women's potential and reinforced stereotypes. Beauvoir emphasized this point when she stated that women have the responsibility to choose their own existence and destiny.[57] This exhortation of responsibility demonstrates Mlle de Beauvoir's unwillingness to place total blame on men for subjecting women to a passive role.

Beauvoir's subversion of socialization functioned as consciousness-raising to break through the stereotypes and

the nonconscious ideology and make persons aware of the truth about men and women ("consciousness-raising" is used here to describe that new level of awareness). According to Beauvoir, stereotyped roles would not exist if:

> the little girl were brought up from the first with the same demands and rewards, the same severity and the same freedom as her brothers, taking part in the same studies, the same games, promised the same future, surrounded with women and men who seemed to be undoubted equals.[58]

While she asserted that man has subjected women to subservience, [and that "man represents both [the] positive and neutral . . . and woman represents only the negative [,]"[59] she did not reprimand man for his behavior but sought to reveal a clearer understanding of how this situation evolved. To achieve the dialogical union of truth and understanding,[60] she thus turned to history, literature, and religion for explanations.

With subversion being a prerequisite to affirmation,[61] Beauvoir subverted existing images of women in order to affirm the human potential of women in society as she conceived of it. She stated that biology, the only true difference between men and women, does not warrant inferior status and that one cannot dictate a model of feminine or masculine nature;[62] this conception strongly affirms the human potential of women. And to those who might be anxious at the prospect of women's transcendence, Beauvoir offers reassurance:

> To disregard myths is not to destroy all dramatic relation between the sexes . . . . To emancipate woman is to refuse to confine her to the relations

> she bears to man, not to deny them to her; let her have her independant existence and she will continue to exist for him also; mutually recognizing each other as subject, each will yet remain for the other an other.63.

Beauvoir's affirmation of women, however, was actually an affirmation of human beings; for "[t]o recognize in a woman a human being is not to impoverish man's experience."[64] She did not prescribe punishment for man's treatment of women, but conceived of a society in which there will be

> new kinds of relationships between human beings, and men as well as women will be changed. Women, and men too, must become human beings first and foremost. The differences which exist between them are no more important than the differences which exist between individual women, or individual men.65

Such affirmation and positive regard for both sexes of her audience further indicate Beauvoir's commitment to dialogic empathy and understanding.

While The Second Sex has achieved an historical position because of its impact on the current feminist movement, the acquisition of its title of "classic" might best be attributed to Beauvoir's dialogical communication--the source of the rhetorical power which has influenced the Women's Movement. Mlle de Beauvoir viewed both men and women readers as equal human beings and communicated her existentialist perspective through dialogue which reported truth as Beauvoir saw it, without condemning men as human beings. She placed the responsibility of awareness and action on both men and women. Although The Second Sex has been the philosophical statement upon which much subsequent feminist discourse has

been based, many communicators have not chosen to employ Beauvoir's method of dialogue. They have, instead, chosen monologue which seeks to destroy men and elevate women.[66] Though it is difficult to measure the success of such discourse, it seems that the dialogical approach of The Second Sex has overshadowed monologue by remaining a source of rhetorical power upon which both male and female supporters of feminism rely. As Cottrell stated,

> [The Second Sex] . . . remains . . . the most forceful vindication of women's rights to have appeared in the twentieth century.[67]

Perhaps communicators of future feminist discourse might well re-examine the power of dialogue and its future potential; for because of the power of dialogue, The Second Sex, as a classic, will continue to communicate to its readers the message of "being human beings"[68] for years to come.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Studs Terkel, taped interview with Simone de Beauvoir, 1960.

[2]Dwight McDonald, "The Lady Doth Protest," Reporter, VIIII (April 14, 1953), p. 36.

[3]Brenda Gill, "No More Eve," New Yorker, XXIV (February 28, 1953), p. 97.

[4]McDonald, "The Lady," p. 36.

[5]Patrick Mullaby, "Women's Place," Nation, CLXXVI (February 21, 1953), p. 171.

[6]Ibid.

[7]Abraham Stone, "A New History of Women, With Special Reference to Their Oppression by Men," Scientific American, CLXXXVIII (April, 1953), p. 105.

[8]Ibid. See also Ashley Montagu, "A SR Panel Takes Aim at 'The Second Sex,'" XXXVI (February 21, 1953), p. 29.

[9]Mullaby, "Women's Place," p. 171.

[10]Montagu, "A SR Panel," p. 29.

[11]Carolyn Platt, Interview, Department of Women's Studies, San Diego State University, San Diego, California, February 16, 1976.

[12]Alice Schwarzer, "The Radicalization of Simone de Beauvoir," in The First M.S. Reader, ed. Francine Klagsburn (New York, 1973), p. 250.

[13]Eleanor Flexner, Century of Struggle: The Womans Rights Movement in the United States (New York, 1973), p. x.

[14]Ann M. Davidson, "A Life Well Lived for All That," Nation, CCXX (June 1973), p. 733.

[15]Beauvoir, taped interview, 1960.

[16]Ibid.

[17]Robert D. Cottrell, Simone de Beauvoir (New York, 1975), pp. 4-7.

[18]Ibid., pp. 24-25.

[19]Ibid., pp. 103-104.

[20]Schwarzer, "Simone de Beauvoir," p. 255.

[21]Lucile Duberman, Gender and Sex in Society (New York, 1975), p. 19.

[22]Ibid., p. 5.

[23]Ibid., p. 9. See also Flexner, Century of Struggle, 1973, pp. 7-8.

[24]Duberman, Gender and Sex, 1975, pp. 6-9.

[25]Cottrell, Beauvoir, 1975, p. 95.

[26]Ibid., p. 96.

[27]Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex, ed. and trans., H.M. Parshley (New York, 1953), p. 249.

[28]Ibid., p. xix.

[29]Cottrell, Beauvoir, 1975, p. 98.

[30]Beauvoir, Second Sex, 1953, p. 33.

[31]Ibid., p. 39.

[32]Floyd W. Matson and Ashley Montagu, "Introduction: The Unfinished Revolution," in The Human Dialogue, eds. Floyd W. Matson and Ashley Montagu (New York, 1967), p. 7.

[33]John Wild, The Challenge of Existentialism (Bloomington, Indiana, 1955), pp. 79, 314.

[34]Matson and Montagu, "Unfinished Revolution,: p. 7.

[35]Cottrell, Beauvoir, 1975, pp. 94-95.

[36]Beauvoir, taped interview, 1960.

[37]Cottrell, Beauvoir, 1975, p. 93.

[38]Matson and Montagu, "Unfinished Revolution," p. 8.

[39]Charles T. Brown and Paul W. Keller, Monologue to Dialogue: An Exploration of Interpersonal Communication (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1973), p. 187.

[40]Ibid., p. 199.

[41]John Poulakos, "The Components of Dialogue," Western Speech XXXXVIII (Summer, 1974), p. 199.

[42]Brown and Keller, Monologue to Dialogue, 1973, p. 199.

[43] Ibid.

[44]Pope Paul VI, "The Dialogue (Ecclesiasm Suam, Part III)," in The Human Dialogue, 1967, p. 134.

[45]Beauvoir, taped interview, 1960.

[46]Schwarzer, "Simone de Beauvoir," pp. 253-255.

[47]Ibid. See also Cottrell, Beauvoir, 1975, p. 93.

[48]Cottrell, Beauvoir, 1975, p. 105.

[49]Beauvoir, taped interview, 1960.

[50]Cottrell, Beauvoir, 1975, p. 93.

[51]Schwarzer, "Simone de Beauvoir," p. 258.

[52]Beauvoir, taped interview, 1960.

[53]Walter R. Fisher, "Reaffirmation and Subversion of the American Dream," The Quarterly Journal of Speech, LIX (April, 1974), pp. 160-167.

[54]Sandra L. Bem and Daryl J. Bem, "Case Study of a Nonconscious Ideology: Training the Woman to Know Her Place," in Beliefs, Attitudes and Human Affairs (Belmont, California, 1970), p. 89.

[55]M.G. Wiley, "Sex Roles in Games," Sociometry, XXXVI (1973), pp. 526-541. See also Lois W. Hoffman, "Early Childhood Experiences and Women's Achievement Motives," Journal of Social Issues, XXVIII (1972), pp. 129-155.

[56]Hoffman, "Childhood Experiences," p. 129. See also Lynn S. Hewitt, "Age and Sex Differences in the Vocational Aspirations of Elementary School Children," The Journal of Social Psychology, CXXXXVI (1975), pp. 173-177.

[57]Beauvoir, Second Sex, 1953, p. 33.

[58]Ibid., p. 683.

[59]Ibid., p. xix.

[60]Pope Paul VI, "Dialogue," p. 134.

[61]Fisher, "Reaffirmation and Subversion," pp. 160-167.

[62]Beauvoir, Second Sex, 1953, p. 30.

[63]Ibid., pp. 295, 688.

[64]Ibid., p. 295.

[65]Schwarzer, "Simone de Beauvoir," p. 259.

[66]Brenda Hancock, "Affirmation by Negation in the Women's Liberation Movement," The Quarterly Journal of Speech, LVIII (October, 1972), pp. 264-271.

[67]Cottrell, Beauvoir, 1975, pp. 106-107.

[68]Beauvoir, taped interview, 1960.